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ABSTRACT

The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education provides his viewpoints on maintaining strong public support for public education by reaching out to every part of the community. The Secretary urges Congress to act on school modernization. He discusses the emerging focus of architecture that now creates schools as community learning centers and the benefits of bringing the entire community into the process of school design. The Secretary argues for building smaller schools to help foster educational and operational efficiencies and presents a few ideas for accomplishing this goal. He further argues that smaller schools can help parents become more involved in their schools, can effect residential growth patterns and impact suburban sprawl, and can provide the catalyst for bringing a community together in reviving a neighborhood. Further argued is the concept of building new schools that are multi-purpose in nature in order to bring the school closer to a community. Finally, the Secretary stresses the importance of linking schools to other learning centers such as museums, businesses, and environmental centers in order to enhance the learning experience. (GR)

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Remarks as prepared for delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Schools as Centers of Community
American Institute of Architects
Washington, DC

Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here again at the American Institute of Architects. We have had a very positive relationship. I am sure that this relationship will grow stronger under the leadership of your President-elect Ron Skaggs.

I want to thank Joe Perkins, the President of the American Association of Retired Persons, for his strong belief that people of all ages can keep expanding their intellectual horizons. I am so very pleased that AARP is stepping forward to take a leadership role in our nation's efforts to modernize our schools and keep our schools open for people of all ages.

As a grandfather of ten, with the eleventh on the way, I experience in a very personal way the wonder and joy of being around children. There are now thousands of senior citizens in our schools working as tutors and mentors and we need thousands more.

In nearby Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, there is a wonderful program called "INTERAGES " which is linking over 30 schools and 9 senior facilities together. Several years ago, I was in Green Bay, Wisconsin and I remember meeting a wonderful grandmother who was quietly teaching a Hmong child to read English.

There is a great deal to be gained by developing this inter-generational alliance, and there is a fundamental reason why this is so important. In ten years, families with school age children will account for only a quarter of our entire population, the lowest level in U.S. history.

This comes at a time when we have more students than ever in our schools with more on the way. There is no short-term solution to the long term problem of breaking national enrollment records year in and year out. To maintain strong public support for public education, educators need to be reaching out to every part of the community, including our senior citizens.

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Congress Should Act on School Modernization

I want to begin my remarks by asking the Congress to pass the President's school modernization proposal. Even at this late hour, this Congress can be about the people's business and get the job done.

Last week's vote in the House on patient rights suggests that the Congress is starting to listen to the American people. I hope the Congress continues to listen just as hard when it comes to our nation's school modernization needs.

For three years now, educators and parents have been asking for federal help to modernize our schools. We spend billions of federal dollars to build highways, to construct immaculate prisons, and to fight beach erosion.

Instead of building immaculate prisons to house illiterate prisoners, why not build immaculate schools that inspire our children to become literate citizens. I have been to hundreds of schools and there are some schools that are simply too old, too worn out and actually unhealthy.

I went to a school in Paterson, New Jersey earlier this year. As I was touring this 100 year-old building, I saw a long line of children standing in the hallway. I asked the principal why the children were in the line. She said that all the children had asthma and the unhealthy air in the old school surely didn't help them.

We are asking these young people to reach for high standards and their biggest concern is breathing. My friends, no child or teacher should be asked to learn and work in an "unhealthy" school building. This must stop.

Now, I sometimes hear the concern that school modernization is a local issue. It is, but the education of our nation's children is a national priority. This nation needs to build and modernize thousands of schools to meet the rising demand for more class space and may I say, smaller classes.

I think the American people are ultimately going to be unwilling to wait while members of Congress make narrow and tortured speeches about federalism. The federal government is not in the business of bricks and mortar. That's a purely local decision.

But we are in the business of trying to help local school districts save billions of dollars on interest payments – freeing up money that can be used to build and modernize even more classrooms. School district debt stood at $110 billion in 1996, and it is only going to get bigger in the years ahead.

There are two additional reasons why Congress should see the President's proposal as a positive approach for local government.

First, freeing up these dollars will surely reduce the pressure to raise property taxes to build new schools, which can be a hardship for senior citizens on fixed incomes. Second, new federal dollars can help offset the construction costs that school districts now incur in their efforts to meet the standards of the Individual Education Disabilities Act – or IDEA.

We have millions of young people with disabilities now attending regular classes, and that is one of the great achievements of American education in the last two decades. At the same time, I know that local officials would welcome any additional help to cover construction costs associated with IDEA.

So why can't Congress take action? Unfortunately, I have come to the reluctant conclusion that politics seems to be getting in the way again. If it is a Clinton proposal, then they must oppose it. That's how too many members of Congress think. For two straight years, almost no Republican members of Congress supported our legislation.

Even Jeb Bush, the Governor of Florida, about as solid a Republican as you can get, said in a recent congressional hearing that he would take all the federal aid he could get for school construction as long as there were no strings attached. That's the beauty of our proposal – there are no strings.

Only in this current session have we, at long last, seen some small movement on the majority side. A narrow and partisan perspective is so counter-productive when it comes to educating our children. We don't educate our children as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents but as Americans.

When Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican President, set out to build the interstate highway system in 1956, he turned to Vice-President Gore's late father, Senator Albert Gore, to shepherd the Federal-Aid Highway Act through the Senate. Why can't this same spirit of bi-partisanship set the tone for increased federal support for school modernization?

I am sure that Vice-President Gore, who has been visiting over-crowded schools in the West in the last two days, would welcome any effort to help local school districts get the assistance they need now. There are legislative vehicles available.

Congressman Charlie Rangel from New York, a Democrat, has 203 sponsors for legislation that has the strong support of this Administration. Congresswoman Nancy Johnson, a Republican from Connecticut, has an almost identical bill that demonstrates bi-partisan support for school modernization.

The most immediate legislative vehicle available may be a measure by Congressman Rangel. It is a paid-for substitute that makes a down payment on the President's $3 billion tax credit proposal that supports $25 billion in bonds. I urge members of both political parties to support this substitute when it comes to the floor in the near future when the full House votes on the tax extenders bill.

Here I want to point out that overcrowding is going to be an increasing problem for our nation's great system of higher education as well. Experts in California describe the coming wave of college students – over 700,000 students in the next ten years – as a "tidal wave."

Thousands of qualified students are already being turned away from the colleges of their choice in California because there is no room. This is a terrible message to send young people who have worked so hard to get ready for college. We need to be imaginative in finding ways to make sure that we have the space available to make sure that all of our young people get a chance to go to college.

Schools as Community Learning Centers

One way to be imaginative is to rethink how we use our existing stock of school buildings. We really are at a point where we need to put aside the old factory model of education that too often isolated the school from the community.

As Joe Perkins so aptly put it – "it makes no sense to lock up costly buildings two-thirds of every day and one-quarter of every year."

There is a new movement growing that seeks to encourage new thinking in the use and design of our nation's schools. I have been to some very interesting schools that reflect this new thinking.

I had the privilege of visiting a public school at the Columbus Zoo in Columbus, Ohio. I can tell you that the zoo is a very exciting learning environment.

How students are learning, where they are learning, and when they are learning is changing. Our thinking about school design needs to reflect these fundamental changes.

At the heart of this creative new thinking is the concept of schools as "centers of community." Architects, planners and school officials are increasingly building new schools as community learning centers.

Now this is not a new idea. The community school movement has existed for well over 60 years. Many urban mayors are working hard to support the expansion of full service community schools. What is different are several concepts at the core of this new thinking in the design and use of school facilities.

Citizen Engagement

The first concept is that citizens need to be much more involved and engaged in the process of designing and planning new schools. Last October, we held the first National Symposium on School Design here in Washington, D.C. The meetings were full of creativity and energy.

I was most taken by the educators and architects who spoke about the many benefits of bringing the entire community – from students, teachers, parents and community groups – into the process of designing new schools. If the school is the center of the community, then learning is at the center of the community.

John Dewey said that we need not only education in democracy but also democracy in education. This is why we are asking the Congress to set aside $10 million for a new discretionary grant program to encourage more citizen engagement in the process of designing and building new schools.

Instead of building schools for 1950, let us build schools for 2050. We need schools that are healthy, energy smart, environmentally sensitive, using up-to-date technology – that complement and enhance academic excellence; schools designed by the community and with the students and community in mind.

Build Smaller Schools

The second concept I want to encourage is the need to build smaller schools. In many cases, we are building schools the size of shopping malls. We have high schools in this nation with 5,000 and 6,000 students. We even have an elementary school in Grayslake, Illinois with close to 4,500 children.

We Americans love bigness. We are a big country and we think in big terms and that's not usually bad. But big is not always better when it comes to the education of our children. Much of the research we have available to us now suggests that schools should be no bigger than 600 students. As one talented principal told me, a school is too big when I can't remember the names of all my students.

However, about 70 percent of all of our nation's students now go to schools with at least 1,000 students. Years ago, we consolidated schools on the assumption that we could provide a more comprehensive education for all of our children.

Many rural communities resisted consolidation for fear that in losing their school they were losing an elemental part of their community. Now, with new research in hand, I suggest we take a second look at what we are doing when it comes to building big schools.

I don't think we are helping our children very much when we ask them to get into the lunch line at 9:30 and 10:00 am in the morning because the cafeteria is too small to handle all the students. If you have ever been to big high school when classes end – watch out. It is controlled chaos with principals and teachers acting as traffic cops.

Small schools, in contrast, allow young people to feel more connected, attendance is higher, classes are smaller, there is less drug and alcohol abuse, and children feel safer. In a small school more young people get involved in activities and parents are more involved as well. These are very important considerations.

I've talked to many honest and caring principals, who admit that they just lose students because their school is too big. They couldn't reach the students before they became disconnected or dropped-out. I think the big idea for the future is this – think small.

Manassas Park High School in Manassas Park, Virginia, which just received a national "merit" award from AIA, is a high school with a student population of 650 students. This school is an example of how a high school can retain a sense of smallness but still provide students with a high quality education.

Now building smaller may also be the only choice for school systems in large urban areas like Los Angeles and New York City that simply do not have large tracts of real estate available to them. There are other reasons as well that suggest that building smaller schools closer to where people actually live makes communities more livable.

Children, for one, do not have to spend half their days on buses. There are parents who have never once been to their child's school because the child is bused halfway across town to relieve over-crowding.

Building smaller schools also has important implications for residential growth patterns. Good schools are an important factor in where people decide to live. By building smaller schools close to where people live, we can encourage the development of smart growth policies that lead to better neighborhoods and more livable communities.

Schools with strong leadership can also be a powerful catalyst for bringing a community together in reviving a neighborhood. One of the oldest schools in the country, Quincy High School in Boston, did just that in provide services and being culturally sensitive to the new Chinese immigrant community.

I also believe that how we locate and build schools can have a great impact on suburban sprawl. Suburban and rural communities may want to seek other alternatives than that of the traditional isolated high school with the empty parking lot.

One approach is to create learning and cultural parks. The school becomes the anchor for integrating a host of facilities that can be accessed and shared by the entire community. Here we are talking about clustering a high school, recreational facilities, public libraries and other cultural institutions in such a way that each gains from its proximity to the other. In doing so, valuable green space is protected.

Building schools for multi-purpose use

Now a third concept: let's build new schools so that they serve the entire community by encouraging multi-purpose use. Rather than isolate the school from the community – which often has been our habit in the past – let's build schools as the anchor and center of our communities. Public schools are just that – public.

Students' minds don't stop working at 3:00 pm and neither do adults' minds. School facilities can be a great resource and a safe one for the entire community after regular school hours. This is why we are so strongly promoting our 21st Century Learning Center initiative. One way to keep children off the street and out of trouble is to keep their minds excited and engaged.

Services for families – adult education, family counseling, and health services – can also help children become better learners. The Tenderloin Community School in San Francisco is an example of how a community came together to build a school that serves many needs.

Building a facility that students and senior citizens can share increases the opportunity for both inter-generational learning and activities. At the same time, public tax dollars get saved because both facilities share resources. This is what is happening at Stables High School in Westport, Connecticut.

Some school districts are also placing high schools and community colleges on the same campus. This is one way Los Angeles, for example, hopes to find more space for its many high school students. Good things can happen academically as well High school students get the opportunity to accelerate their learning by taking college courses.

George Washington University, for example, has created a partnership with the "School without Walls High Schools" here in the District of Columbia that gives students access to the university library and to 100 university classes a year. In exchange, the University uses the school building for evening classes.

Schools in the Community: Location of Learning

Now a final concept. We ought to look at every community as a living classroom and help our schools create new pathways to learning. The "location of learning" is often just as important as the size and organization of a school.

We have so much to gain by linking schools to museums, art and cultural groups, zoos, environmental centers, businesses and non-profit associations. Giving our young people more opportunities for learning off the school-site is particularly important for high school students.

This is the old idea of apprenticeship updated to a 21st century model. Our young people are quick learners, and they need new opportunities to test their learning in constructive and practical ways. This is one of the great potential benefits of public charter schools and why this Administration supports more public school choice.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by suggesting that this really should be the golden era of school design. Every era has its architectural signature. The Greeks built the Acropolis. Great Gothic cathedrals were built in the Middle Ages. In this century, the modern skyscraper has lifted our sights. What will be the architectural signature of the new millennium?

I suggest that we set out to build the thousands of schools we need in such a way that they capture the "noble character of public architecture" at it best. The great Greek philosopher Plato said, "that which is honored in a country …is that which will be cultivated there."

Let us build our nation's schools so that 50 years from now people will look back and say - yes - that was a special time – that our attention to the quality design of our schools reflected the cultivation and high value we placed on citizenship, community and learning for all Americans.

Thank you.